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SERMON XXVII.

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THE CHRISTIAN PREACHER'S COMMISSION.

So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel ; therefore thou shalt hear the word from my mouth, and warn them from me. EZEKIEL xxxiii, 7.

THE prophet who is here addressed, had received a commission from the Lord of Hosts, which carried with it life or death to himself, and the people to whom he was sent. As he would hope to deliver his own soul, as well as theirs, he was called upon to execute faithfully the trust committed to him. In the words immediately following the text, God addresses him thus : " When I say unto the wicked man, thou shalt surely die ; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked man from his way, the wicked man shall die in his iniquity ; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way, to turn from it ; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity ; but thou hast delivered thy soul."

It becomes him who bears a message of such fearful import, to look well to the charge which he has received. No licence

is given him to rely on his own inventive powers, to furnish the subject of his communications. "Thou shalt hear the word from my mouth," saith God, "and warn them from me." The ambassador of Christ has *his* commission from the same high authority, which gave this charge to the prophet; and for the same momentous purpose. God has set him as a watchman to the house of Israel; and has enjoined it upon him, to hear the word from *his* mouth, and warn them from *him*. The word which the preacher is to hear, is the will of God, revealed in the volume of inspired truth. The people who are to be warned by it, are those who attend on his ministrations. How simple, how definite, and how imperative is his commission.

I. *He is to resort directly to the Scriptures, to learn what the will of God is.*

II. *This is to be the subject of his communications to his people.*

To illustrate these positions, will be the object of the present discourse.

I. *It is the duty of the Christian minister, to derive the truths which he preaches directly from the Scriptures.* This is the fountain from which he is to draw his religious doctrines, his rules of duty, his views of the human heart, his evidence of Christian character, and the sanctions of eternal retribution, by which he enforces his exhortations and warnings. He is not merely to call in the aid of scriptural authority, in confirmation of opinions which he has first derived from others, or formed from his own reasoning. He is to commence his search after religious truth, by opening the sacred volume, and yielding his whole soul to its teaching and its influence.

In one respect, he is placed in a different situation from that of the prophet in the text. The preacher at the present day has a written communication of the will of God, while the prophet might be directly instructed by a voice from heaven. But this is only a circumstantial difference. If the word of God has come to us, it has the same authority, whether addressed to our hearing, or placed before our eyes. The law which was written upon tables of stone, was as binding on the tribes of Israel, through all their generations as upon those who heard it, amid the thunders of Sinai.

Addressing, as I do, a Christian audience, I go upon the supposition, that a revelation from heaven has actually been made to us; that it is contained in the book which we call the scriptures; that this is truly the word of the living God. This book of inspiration, the watchman on the walls of Zion is bound to regard as the source of his religious opinions, and the guide of his instructions, because God has commanded him thus to do—because its author is a being of boundless knowledge and eternal truth—because it is exactly adapted to the design of his minis-

try—and abundantly sufficient for the great purpose of salvation.

1. The preacher is bound to derive his opinions and instructions from the Bible, in obedience to the *command* of its divine author.

"Thou shalt hear the word from my mouth," saith God. Thus saith the Lord, "Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I command thee to speak unto them : diminish not a word."*

Who is it that thus commissions the prophet to speak in his name? It is the God of heaven ; the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Were an ambassador from an earthly potentate, sent with a message to some remote portion of his dominions, would the servant venture to substitute the suggestions of his own reason, for the instructions of his sovereign? But he from whom the minister of Christ has received his commission, is the ruler of all worlds. In this lower province of his empire, the race of men are the subjects of his righteous authority. He has given them his law. He has made known its awful sanctions. And yet they have refused to obey. They stand condemned before him. If not saved by his grace, they must perish forever. All souls are his. Our eternal interests depend on his will. And now, when in the riches of his mercy, he has sent to us the message of reconciliation ; when the ambassadors of Christ are furnished with the offers of pardon ; when the terms of acceptance are distinctly opposed ; are these divine communications to be subjected to the modifying power of human philosophy, before they are delivered to those for whom they were made?

2. The minister of Christ is bound to derive the doctrines which he preaches directly from the Bible, because it is the word of a being of *boundless knowledge* and *eternal truth*. His plan of moral government which, in its provisions, embraces the successive generations of men, extends to other worlds, and reaches down through the ceaseless ages of futurity. He comprehends, in a single view, all the relations which the parts of this boundless system bear to each other. He knows how the different portions of his vast empire are effected by an example of apostacy in our world. He knows upon what conditions mercy may be extended to us, without endangering the safety of his kingdom. He knows perfectly the nature, the operations, the thoughts and the purposes of the human mind ; and the truths which are best calculated to influence and control its affections. He has a full comprehension of the powers of human language ; and of the

*Jeremiah xxvi. 2.

modes of address which will most effectually reach the heart. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for us. It is high; we cannot attain unto it." We cannot penetrate the deep recesses of the human heart. We cannot look through distant worlds, and distant ages, to sit in judgment on the divine administration, which embraces them all. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts."^{*} He is a God of eternal and perfect truth. "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but his words will not pass away." He has no occasion to practice deception to accomplish his purposes.

On the veracity and omniscience of God rests the peculiar evidence of revealed truth. It is the word of him who cannot err, and who will not deceive. "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater." It is a point of the highest moment to the Christian teacher, that he keep steadily in view, the broad line of distinction between this kind of evidence and every other. Different sciences are built upon different foundations. Mathematical propositions are supported by intuition and demonstration. Philosophical truths are established by observation and experiment. Our belief of historical facts depends mostly on the testimony of fallible men. But the evidence of Scriptural truth is the testimony of God himself. Here human reasoning has no right to interfere. It is bound to stand aside, and hear what God the Lord hath said. Reason decides, indeed, and decides intuitively, that the word of the God of truth is to be believed. It is also the office of reason to inquire whether he has actually spoken to us; whether the Scriptures are really his word. And it further belongs to reason, to interpret the language which we find there; to determine what God hath said. Thus far may reason go in this case, but no farther. It is bound to submit implicitly to the divine declarations, whatever they may be. Here is the distinction between faith and mere reason. Not that faith, in divine testimony, is opposed to reason. But the objects of faith are frequently above unassisted reason. The highest efforts of the human mind could not reach them without a revelation from heaven. Reason conducts us to the infinite fountain of knowledge, but does not itself discover the truths which are made known by inspiration. These are to be received on the simple testimony of God. Reason points to the foundation on which our faith must rest. Faith reposes on this immutable support. Divine testimony is the highest of all evidence, unless it be intuitive and demonstrative certainty. There is no demonstration superior to the "demonstration of the

* Isaiah lv. 9.

Spirit" of God. Inspiration can never demand our assent to what is demonstratively false. But it discloses to us many truths, which to mere reason, unassisted by revelation, would appear highly improbable. This is owing to the immeasurable distance between the divine understanding and ours. What to our limited powers appears to be true, a God of boundless intelligence often knows to be false. Especially are we unable to penetrate the depth of his own designs. "How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out." Mysteries gather around us whenever we attempt, by our own reason alone, to investigate the arrangements of his vast and eternal kingdom. The truths which he reveals to us, may or may not accord with the opinions which we ourselves had formed. Their previous probability or improbability, is, therefore, no ground on which we are to receive or reject them, when we find them in the word of God. The deepest mysteries are to be received with as full an assent as the most simple and obvious suggestions of reason. No considerations can give to the latter a higher degree of evidence, than that which the declaration of God affords to the former.

3. The Christian preacher is to derive his religious opinions directly from the word of God, *because this is so exactly adapted to the design of his ministry.* His great object, if he is faithful, is the salvation of men. This is the very purpose for which the Scriptures were written. They come from a God of infinite benevolence. They relate to his government over us. They unfold to us his dispensation of mercy for the recovery of a fallen race. They make known to us the great sacrifice of atonement for sin. They propose the terms on which we may be restored to the divine favor. They furnish perfect rules for the guide of our conduct. They offer us the assistance which we need from the spirit of grace. They disclose to us the retributions of the eternal world. All this is done by him who is earnestly engaged in seeking our salvation. Is the system of means which he has devised for this purpose defective? Who will venture to propose improvements on the plans of infinite wisdom?

4. The treasures of religious truth in the Scriptures, are abundantly *sufficient* for the great purpose of the Christian Ministry. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable, —that the man of God may be *perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*" There is no deficiency in this book of Revelation, to be supplied by the aid of human philosophy.

Perhaps it will be said that philosophical knowledge is necessary, to enable us to *interpret* the Scriptures; to learn from the written word, what is the mind of the Spirit. It must be admitted that the divine will is communicated to us through the medium of *human language*; that the writers were men who ex-

pressed themselves according to their own peculiar habits of thinking and speaking ; and that what they wrote was adapted to the understandings and circumstances of the persons whom they addressed. Though inspired of God, they were themselves men, speaking to their fellow-men, in the language of men. They spoke and wrote with the intention of being understood. That kind of learning, therefore, which explains the language of the Bible, which shows the design, the views, and the situation of the writers, which places us in the condition of the persons addressed, which makes a skillful application of the correct rules of interpretation, is of the highest importance in directing our inquiries after the true meaning of Scripture. But it is not a sound principle of interpretation, to determine beforehand what doctrines *ought* to be found, or are probably to be found, in the Bible ; and, therefore, to make it speak a language in conformity with our preconceived opinions. Of the truths contained in the Scriptures, there are some which are evident, or probable, from the light of nature. There are others, which, till they were revealed, the mind of man had not even thought of. There are others again, which natural reason would have pronounced to be improbable. "God revealeth deep and secret things." "He doeth great things, which we cannot comprehend." The Scriptural evidence, therefore, in favor of any doctrine, is wholly independent of the probability furnished by reasoning alone, without the aid of revelation. This evidence is the simple testimony of God. It is neither weakened nor strengthened by any previous opinion which we had formed on the subject revealed.

Philosophical speculation, therefore, has nothing to do in ascertaining the meaning of Scripture, except by explaining and applying the common principles upon which language is to be interpreted. The *doctrines* of metaphysical philosophy ought to have no influence in determining the doctrines of the Bible. If the language of Scripture is to be so explained as to conform invariably to probabilities suggested by reason, then is it no revelation ? It makes known to us no new truths. It can decide no controverted point. For each contending party will give the passages referred to as proofs, the meaning which accords with its own opinions. This is the great reason why the various denominations of Christians make, ordinarily, no approaches towards agreement in doctrine, by discussions, which professedly, refer to the Scriptures, as a common rule of faith. In truth, each party, instead of making the Scriptures the only standard of belief, makes his own opinions, to some extent at least, the standard of Scripture. This is very commonly done, by interpreting particular passages either literally or figuratively, as best answers the purpose of the disputants. Only grant to a theological combatant the option, of giving to the

texts which he quotes, either a literal or figurative meaning, and he will find no difficulty in supporting, by an appearance of Scriptural authority, any doctrine whatever. If the book of God is to be interpreted according to preconceived philosophical opinions, it will not be *one* Bible, but *many*. It will be made to contain as many different systems of doctrines, as there are different schemes of philosophy brought forward to give a construction to its contents. Its meaning must vary, as one plan of speculation becomes unfashionable, and give place to another.

But it may be asked, Did not the writers of the Scriptures address themselves to the common understanding of men? Did they not accommodate their language to the opinions of those for whom they wrote? Did they not, like other writers, proceed on the supposition, that many things were already known to their readers? And is it not proper, that this knowledge, which had such influence in modifying the composition of the sacred penman, should be brought into view, in searching for their meaning? To this I answer, that it may be very necessary, in interpreting the Scriptures, to take into consideration the opinions and modes of thinking of the classes of persons to whom they were originally addressed. The true point of inquiry is, how did *they*, if they were candid, understand what was said to them. How did the children of Israel understand Moses? How did the primitive Christians understand Christ and his apostles? But the words of Scripture were not spoken to modern metaphysicians. Paul did not reason with philosophers of the present age. Their speculative opinions are not the standard according to which the Bible is to be interpreted.

II. I proceed to the consideration of the second branch of our subject: that *the truths which the preacher hath derived from the Scriptures, are to be the substance of his communications.* "Thou shalt warn them from me, saith the Lord." This is the great purpose for which he is to apply himself so diligently to the study of the Scriptures, that he may make known to the people of his charge what the will of God is. He is bound to do this.

1. Because nothing else will accomplish the design of his ministry. It is Scriptural truth which is the great instrument of sanctification. The prayer of Christ to the Father is, "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." The preacher may entertain his hearers with fine speculations on the powers and operations of the human mind. He may trace, with the hand of a master, the connection between motives and actions. He may gain their admiration, by exhibitions of his own powers of invention and reasoning. Every link in the chain of his logical deductions, may be rightly placed; and firmly connected with its antecedent and its consequent. His philosophical theology may be wrought into a finely proportioned and compacted sys-

tem. But all this will not be effectual to salvation. And why not? Because human philosophy is not the truth of God. It is "the wisdom of this world." I am aware, that even the light of nature is sufficient to enable us to read our sentence of condemnation. But it cannot devise a plan of redemption. It may show us a world in ruins; but can discover no way of repairing the desolation. It may conduct the guilty soul to the chambers of perdition; but cannot open to it the glories of heaven. The plan of redeeming mercy, is disclosed to us by revelation only. "When the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God, by the foolishness of preaching, to save those who believe. Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for those who love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit." And what he has revealed is sufficient, without the aid of human philosophy.

It is admitted, that even Scriptural truth, though preached in its purity and simplicity, will not save the soul, unless made effectual by the sanctifying influence of the Spirit. But we have no sufficient ground for expecting that renewing grace will accompany the speculations of philosophy. "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets, that prophecy unto you; they make you vain, they speak a vision out of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord. They shall not profit this people at all. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused the people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way. Is not my word like a fire, saith the Lord; and like a hammer, that breaketh the rock in pieces."^{*}

Some may be ready to ask: In what then consists the difficulty of the preacher's office, if he has nothing more to do, than merely to deliver to his people what is ready furnished to his hands in the sacred volume? Does it require years of preparation, and a life devoted to study, to enable a man to read portions of Scripture to his audience? To this I answer, that the preacher's duty is two-fold; in the first place, to investigate the true meaning of the word of God; and secondly to communicate this meaning to his people. He is to perform the office of the Levites, who explained the law to the children of Israel. "They read in the book of the law distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."[†] This is what the Christian preacher is bound to do; to give the sense of Scripture, and to cause the people to understand it. Each of the two parts of his duty, calls for high attainments and efforts. But

* Jeremiah xxiii. 16-32

† Nehemiah viii. 8.

the qualifications for one and the other, are of a different character. In investigating the meaning of Scripture, he derives assistance from a knowledge of the ancient languages. To make this meaning understood, he must possess a command over the powers of the language in which he speaks. For the former object, he needs a familiar knowledge of the local situation, modes of living, customs, and habits of thinking, of the people who originally received the oracles of God. For the latter, an acquaintance with the peculiar circumstances, feelings, pursuits, and opinions of the members of his congregation. He first learns how Paul spoke to Greeks, and Romans, and Jews; and then considers how he would have spoken to an English or American assembly, at the present day. By searching the Scriptures, he is to enlighten and impress his own mind. In addressing his people, he is to communicate instruction and emotion to them. These two parts of his duty are sufficient to occupy his time, and the resources of his mind, without the addition of curious speculations on philosophical theology.

Still it may be urged that, although logical discussion may not be necessary for the purpose of discovering new religious truths; yet it may be of great service, in defending the doctrines which are the subject of revelation. If nothing more is here meant, than supporting the doctrines of Scripture by Scriptural evidence; comparing, elucidating, and applying the different parts of this evidence; this is included in what has just been described as the preacher's duty. It is the very purpose to which his reasoning powers ought to be pre-eminently devoted.

Will any one say, that it may be well to confirm this Scriptural evidence, by considerations drawn from other sources? And shall we attempt to confirm that which we admit to be the testimony of God himself; that God who has given us all our powers of reasoning and judging, and who, if he were willing to deceive us, could stamp deception upon the very faculties of the soul? Are we to suspend our belief of a doctrine revealed by God, till we can prove it by other evidence? "And I, brethren," says Paul to the Corinthians, "came not to you with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God; but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power;—that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

The harmony which exists between the truth presented in his word, and the light which shines upon us from his works and his providence, is a very proper subject of devout meditation, and of practical preaching. But God is to be believed, when he speaks to us; whether we can or cannot trace the connection between his declarations and the operations of his hands.

If, then, metaphysical philosophy is not allowed to lay the

foundation of our religion ; or to interpret, or modify, or add to the revelation of God ; has the preacher no occasion for the cultivation of his logical powers ? no use for the science of mental philosophy ? Is the time devoted to this portion of a liberal education, to be regarded as all lost to him ? By no means.

There is a purpose, to which, with due caution, acquisitions and skill of this nature may be very properly applied ;—meeting the cavils of those who pervert the Scriptures, or who reject them altogether. One of these classes accommodate the meaning of the Bible to their own pre-conceived and erroneous opinions. The other set aside the whole book of God, because it contains some things which do not accord with their own philosophy. Both are to be met, principally by presenting the direct evidence of the truth ; but partly by showing the fallacy of their own reasonings. “The fool is to be understood according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.” The caviler is to be taken on his own ground, and driven from the positions in which he is attempting to fortify himself. But in doing this, it is of the utmost importance, to keep steadily in view, the difference between the foundation on which the truth is supported, and the weapons which you use in combating error. You may confound the objector, without bringing him to a conviction of the truth. There is reason to fear, that when driven from one stronghold of delusion, he will take refuge in another. The course of measures adopted in opposing him, if not managed with great caution, may carry this danger with him. The attitude of attack which you assume, may seem to him to imply, that so long as he can fortify himself by starting new objections, he can maintain his ground. This may confirm him in permanent error. For some of the most important truths are inseparably connected with difficulties, which no human sagacity can wholly remove. The very being and perfections of God, and even our own existence, involve mysteries, which our limited powers can never fully explain. A proposition is not of course false, because it is attended with difficulties. Nor, on the other hand, is its freedom from difficulties, any proof that it is true. The real design, therefore, of attempting to confute the objector to sound religious doctrine, should be to shake his confidence in his own unaided reasoning ;—to prevail on him to submit his judgment to the direct evidence of the truth ; and that is Scriptural evidence, the testimony of God and his inspired messengers. The object should be, to bring him to feel the force of the expostulation, “Who art thou, that repliest against God ?” It will be in vain, that you drive him from one resting place, after another, if you do not persuade him to fix his reliance upon the “rock of ages.” The forms of error are endlessly varied. Confuting a thousand heresies, does not necessarily establish the truth. This can be

done only by direct and positive proof. And in the case of evangelical truth, no evidence is sufficient, but that of revelation. No other foundation can here be laid, than that which is already laid. Life and immortality are brought to light only by the gospel. Metaphysical reasoning may be sufficient to overthrow metaphysical error ; but not to establish the truth as it is in Jesus. Believing merely because we have reasoned out a proposition, is not believing on the testimony of God.

Let the preacher, then, be furnished with philosophical weapons, to ward off the attacks of philosophical opposers. Let him be versed in mental science, that the enemies of the truth may not triumph over him, on the ground of their boasted superiority in this respect. Let him study it early ; that it may not first come upon him, with a fascinating and bewildering influence, in the midst of his parochial ministrations. Let him study it deeply ; that he may understand its proper use, its limits, and its perplexities. On no subject, perhaps, is a little more learning dangerous, than on this. The deleterious qualities of metaphysics lie mostly on the surface.

2. The preacher is to make the truth of Scripture the burden of his communications to his people, because this is a message which can be easily understood. It is brought down to the comprehension of a common religious assembly. It is the simplicity of Scriptural truth, which adapts it to all classes of hearers. "To the poor, the gospel is preached ; to men of common life, and of common education. It will not be denied, I trust, that it is possible for the omniscient Creator through the medium of ordinary language, to make a revelation of his will, which can be understood by men of plain common sense. Such is in fact the revelation of the Scriptures.

But of all modes of communication, the language of metaphysical philosophy is the least adapted to the understanding of an ordinary congregation. Philosophical preaching requires a philosophical audience. It is true, there are some things even in the Scriptures hard to be understood. But the great doctrines and precepts which are the means of sanctification and salvation, though they may be indistinctly presented in some passages, are clearly exhibited in others. Not only the meaning of the statements is easily seen, but the evidence by which they are supported. The declaration, "Thus saith the Lord," can be instantly understood and applied by a whole congregation. Here is no necessity for a long logical process to bring conviction to our minds. We may believe a fact, on the testimony of God, without knowing the train of causes from which it has proceeded. We may believe a doctrine without tracing its connection with a system of doctrines. We may believe in the foreknowledge of God, without being able to explain the

manner in which he foresees all events. We may believe in the resurrection of the dead, without knowing how they will be raised, or "with what body they will come." We may believe in the influence of the spirit, without being able to explain the mode of his operation.

But how is a plain man to arrive at a knowledge of religious truth, by the refinements of metaphysical reasoning? Suppose he make the attempt. He has a new science to learn; a science abounding in nice distinctions, requiring an analysis of the faculties and operations of the mind, and embracing a knowledge of the relations of cause and effect, powers and susceptibilities, motives and actions. When examining a particular proposition, he finds that this is dependent on another, that other on a third; and that he is to follow out a chain of dependencies and logical deductions. To establish a single truth, he must show its connection with a whole system of truths.

If he looks to the pulpit for instruction on these subjects he is involved in the mysteries of metaphysical phraseology. His minister speaks to him in an unknown tongue. He finds that he has not only a new science, but a new language to learn. The language of common life, and common business, has not the philosophical precision which is requisite for nice metaphysical investigation. Here again a new difficulty is presented. The language of metaphysics is far from being settled. In some sciences, the peculiar precision which is required is in a good degree attained by a general agreement in the use of terms. But this is by no means the case in metaphysical theology. Even the classification of the powers of the mind is not agreed upon by writers on mental philosophy; some enumerating many original faculties, others reducing them to a very small number. This must of course lead to a great want of precision, in the application and use of terms. Such indistinctness, where the language ought, if possible, to be settled with mathematical exactness, is a source of endless misapprehensions. It always furnishes to a disingenuous disputant an opportunity of retreating, under the cover of indefinite phraseology. Metaphysical controversies become interminable except from the weariness of the contending parties, or of their readers. There is reason to believe that another generation, at least, must pass off before the language of mental philosophy will become settled. In this chaotic state of metaphysical phraseology, how are the common people to establish their religious opinions by a course of philosophical investigation?

But if they turn to the word of God as the foundation of their faith they are relieved from these perplexities. The evidence of religious doctrines, as it is there presented, is of such a nature as not to require the use of philosophical expressions. God

has spoken to us in the language of common life ; "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth." He who gave to the human mind its existence and powers can surely speak to it in such a manner as to be understood. The language of Scripture is often figurative ; but the figures are mostly drawn from the business and scenery of common life. The original communications were chiefly made to a single people, occupying for many generations the same spot of ground, and remarkably simple and uniform in their modes of living. So that, with a moderate acquaintance with their peculiar circumstances and history, we may place ourselves in their situation, and understand the most important parts of the Bible, as they understood them. If metaphysical philosophy had been necessary to salvation, it would seem that the Bible would have given us a new metaphysical language.

It is true, there are controversies respecting the meaning of Scripture. But these are, in a great measure, owing to the fact that different and opposite philosophical opinions are applied to the interpretation ; that we are not satisfied with receiving implicitly the testimony of God, without knowing the reasons of his declarations. In this way we give to the Bible various and contradictory meanings instead of deriving the true one from the book itself. The preacher ought so to address his hearers as to put them upon searching the Scriptures for themselves ; bringing every doctrine which he teaches to the trial of this unerring standard. This is the most effectual way of establishing them firmly and unitedly in the truth. The best of all commentaries on the Bible, is the Bible itself.

3. The preacher is bound to make the Scriptures his guide, not only in the doctrines which he teaches, but in the practical exhortations which he gives to his people. Thou shalt warn them from me, says God to the prophet. The preacher has two classes of hearers to address, the righteous and the wicked. To each of these, he is called to give appropriate instruction and admonition, derived from the word of God.

The Scriptures are the only safe guide, in giving directions to impenitent sinners ; particularly when their attention is excited to the great interests of salvation. This is no time for hazarding experiments upon the conflicting emotions of the trembling inquirer ; no time for trying the efficacy of favorite philosophical theories. When the question appears to be on the point of being decided, whether the sinner shall turn and live forever, or harden himself in a hopeless continuance in transgression, the spiritual guide who has any just sense of the worth of the soul, will deeply feel his own need of assistance and direction from on high. Who would venture, in such a situation, to substitute the suggestions of refined speculation, for the counsels of infinite

wisdom? God only knows the hearts of all. He only knows the means of turning them, as the rivers of water are turned. He knows the truths which will most frequently be accompanied with the sanctifying influence of the Spirit. We may safely adopt the directions which we find in his word, whether we are able or not to determine their proper place, in a system of speculative theology.

The Christian minister, in faithfully warning the people of his charge, is called upon to discriminate between the saint and the sinner. This is one of the most important and difficult parts of his duty. The traits of Christian character ought to be so delineated, that each individual may apply them to his own case; and determine whether he is a friend or enemy of God. But how is this to be done? The only safe way, is to follow the directions given in the word of God; directions from him who has a perfect knowledge of the human heart, and of the grounds on which he will make the final separation between the righteous and the wicked. We may form rules for the trial of character more conformable to systematic theology than those which we find in the Scriptures; stated with greater logical exactness, and seemingly better fitted to expose the refuges of self-deception. But is it possible that human sagacity can furnish more decisive tests of character than those which are given by Infinite wisdom? Can philosophical acuteness penetrate deeper into the recesses of the heart, than he who understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts?

Inf. 1. The view which has now been taken of this subject, naturally suggests the inference, that the preacher, whenever he thinks proper to introduce philosophical reasoning into his discourses, ought effectually to guard his hearers against confounding his own speculations with the simple truths of revelation. "The prophet who shall presume to speak a word in my name," says God, "which I have not commanded him to speak; —that prophet shall die." The people have a right to know what doctrines are supported by the testimony of God; and they should be taught how to distinguish between these and the inventions of uninspired men. But the two are so often blended together, in discourses from the desk, and in religious publications; metaphysical reasoning is so interwoven with Scriptural declarations, that no marked line of distinction is preserved between them. A doctrine is found in the Scriptures. A philosophical theory is proposed to explain it. The doctrine and the theory are exhibited in such intimate union, that they soon come to be considered as indissolubly connected. He who doubts the one, is believed, of course, to have renounced the other. We forget what has come to us from heaven, and what from the wisdom of this world; and in point of importance, re-

duce them to a common level. No wonder, then, that philosophy should greatly corrupt the simplicity of revealed truth.

2. Another inference which may be drawn from the subject is, that ministers and Christians who are agreed in their belief of the great truths of revelation, ought not to be alienated from each other on account of their different philosophical explanations of Scriptural doctrines. The differences of opinion which occasion such animated controversies among the numerous divisions and subdivisions of parties in the Christian world, are frequently nothing more than different modes of accounting for doctrines in wh ch most of the combatants are agreed. Now there would be some reason for this zealous adherence to philosophical theories, if these constituted the evidence by which the doctrines are supported. Rejecting the former, might be considered as removing the foundation of our belief in the latter. But with truths supported by the testimony of God, the case is widely different. We may equally believe them, whether we adopt this or that mode, or no mode, of showing their connection with other truths. Shall I then denounce a man as a heretic, because we have adopted different metaphysical theories, in explanation of Scriptural truths which we both receive ? I may suppose that if I were to admit his hypothesis, I must, to be consistent, reject the doctrine to which it is applied. And are the divine declarations to be set aside unless they can be shown to accord with my favorite philosophy ? If he who differs from me, claims that his speculations are essential to salvation, that they are necessary additions to revealed truth, that without them the word of God cannot be supported or believed ; then let him be admonished for his presumption. But the great danger to the cause of religion is not so much that this or that unfounded theory may be advanced, as that any metaphysical theory, whether true or false, should be relied upon, as the foundation of our faith. It is the dependence upon philosophical speculations which opens the flood-gates of error. Points of metaphysical theology may be amicably discussed, if they are not allowed to usurp the place which belongs exclusively to revealed truth. But we so elevate their importance, and so fiercely contend for them, that a doubt respecting a speculative theory, as certainly draws upon a man the imputation of heresy, as a rejection of the faith once delivered to the saints. Is it proper, that the peace of the churches, and the harmony among faithful ministers, should be violated, by contests for victory, between systems of curious speculation ? If these points of ardent contention are Scriptural truths, they can be supported by Scriptural evidence. If they are not doctrines of Scripture, let them have their proper rank among other inventions of philosophy. Is it right, that the simple truths of the gospel should be so in-

terwoven with questions of doubtful disputation, that plain Christians cannot separate the one from the other. Let us have the river of the water of life, as it comes to us, pure from the eternal fountain, unadulterated by mixtures of human philosophy.

3. The real improvements which have hitherto been made, or which are hereafter to be made in religious opinion, consist not of additions to the doctrines of revelation, but of a more exact understanding of the Scriptures themselves. The progress of Christians in the knowledge of God, and the truths relating to his kingdom, is much more rapid in one age and country than in another. This progress, however, is not proportioned to the advances which are made at the time in refined speculation ; but to the earnestness, the humility, and the teachable spirit, with which the Scriptures are studied. Periods in which the pride of philosophy has been most exalted, have often been distinguished for the wildest departures from the simplicity of Scriptural theology. We need no additions to the inexhaustible treasures of inspired truth. They are sufficient to occupy the researches, not only of the longest life, but of successive ages. When Christians of every sect and name, instead of wasting their strength, in building and fortifying walls of partition in the church, shall set themselves down to the study of one and the same divine book ; when the instructions which they draw from it shall be prized above the highest attainments in sciences merely human ; when the spiritual riches thus accumulated in one age, shall be transmitted to succeeding generations ; then may we expect that the different denominations, as they approach nearer to a common standard of faith, will be brought nearer and nearer to each other ; that the influence of the spirit will be given abundantly, to bless the discoveries of heavenly truth ; that increasing light will be accompanied with increasing holiness and peace till the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, and the glory of his praise.

SERMON XXVIII.

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THE UNION OF BELIEVERS.

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word ; that they all may be one : as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us : that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."—JOHN xvii. 20, 21.

THE Scripture, of which this passage is a part, is usually described as our Lord's "intercessory prayer." For popular usage, no better designation, perhaps, can be employed. Yet we must be careful to remember that it is not exact. Dr. Owen very justly observes that "Christ did not ask these blessings for his disciples, as a man asks the favor of God for himself or his fellow-man. It was the Eternal Son who here addresses the Father, and his prayer is to be regarded as a great *declaration of his will*, in respect to those who have been given him in the solemn covenant of redemption."

With this explanation, our present purpose does not require any departure from the common phraseology. We must only bear in mind that what Christ here asks, is not merely the good desire of a holy heart, but a grand and certain result of his mediatorial work.

The theme of the text is the *Union of Believers*. It can hardly be said that recent agitations have invested it with a new importance ; but they have at least served to turn the thoughts of Christians towards it with a more than ordinary frequency and interest.

Let us consider, then, how these words of Jesus bear upon certain questions with which every one of us is practically concerned, and which are giving direction to the speculations, and shaping the efforts of many in the church of God to-day.

Thus far the Lord had been praying especially for his disciples who were with him. His thoughts now took a wider range, as he declared, "neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." His petitions had reference, not only to the present, but to the future as

well. They comprehended not merely the little band of personal followers, but all who should, as the result of their ministry, be brought to exercise faith. There is something to us inexpressibly sweet and strengthening in the reflection, that the affection and solicitude of the Saviour, on the very eve of his sufferings, were thus manifested toward believers in all coming time. They, who are his friends to-day, were included in the wide reach of the sympathy and love which found expression in this intercessory prayer.

But to what end was this supplication? "That they all may be one." Here, as we often find to be the case, the word "that" is ambiguous, denoting with equal correctness, the immediate object, or the logical result. Either of two meanings may then be the true one. (1.) I pray for the oneness of my disciples; this is the distinctive blessing that I desire them to enjoy. Or, (2.) I pray for them, that they may be sanctified, so that, as the ultimate result, they may all be one. The difference, verbally, is very decided, but practically, it amounts to but little. On the first supposition, the unity of Christians is shown to be a matter of so great importance, that our Lord specifically prayed for it. On the second, it is equally shown that a true progress in piety will infallibly lead to this unity. And in either case, this remains the prominent and emphatic thought of the passage, that Christians *are* to be one. Their unity is to be regarded as an object at once practicable, desirable, and necessary, whether because Christ immediately prayed for it, or prayed for such blessings and graces as would certainly secure it.

The next clause gives the model or example of this close relationship: "As thou Father art in me, and I in thee." Observe here that Christ's oneness with the Father is not always spoken of in the same sense. The expression, in its emphatic use, denotes a oneness of essence. The three persons of the Godhead are the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Christ declared to the Jews, "I and my Father are one," by which they understood him to claim equality with God. And this is a vital doctrine of our Christian faith, to which we tenaciously adhere.

But elsewhere a union is referred to, which is one of agreement, sympathy, love; and the text seems to be an example in point. For, besides the fact that a *mutual* indwelling is here described, the relation intended is set forth as the great pattern for the church, whose members cannot possibly be one in essence, but one only in the exercise of perfect mutual affection. And what stronger statement of the privilege and duty of believers could be framed into words? Christ and the Father were in absolute concord. They were and are forever one in love. And with this divine example before them, Christians are to desire and seek after unity.

This oneness is in God and Christ: "that they also may be one in us." For this is the great issue of the Holy Spirit's work, not only that believers may be joined to one another by a real and comprehensive bond, but that they may together dwell in God, and enjoy that blessed communion with him, which implies sympathy, love, and obedience.

The text expresses last of all a great moral end to be gained by this unity: "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." While the happiness of the believer and the glory of God are both promoted by the oneness of the church, the testimony thus given to the world is of too great consequence to be overlooked. When Christians heartily agree, and show themselves to be united with one another and with Christ, it is an unanswerable argument in favor of Christ's claims. And the contrary is therefore to be inferred, that their disagreement and separation are hurtful to religion, and lead men to speak lightly of the Son of God.

The *reason* of the thing, therefore, its manifest *excellence*, and its *moral effect*, are all powerful motives to seek the fulfilment of our Lord's prayer. Nothing can be more just and seemly than that those who believe in the same Redeemer, receive the same gospel, and journey towards the same heaven, should be drawn together in the closest possible union. Nothing, surely, could be more delightful than this to Christians themselves. And we should find it difficult to say what would operate with mightier effect upon the world around us, than for Christian churches to live and labor without discord or alienation, their members exercising universal charity, and glorying in the same profession. On the other hand, are we not all conscious of the hurtful influence which results from the putting up of barriers, no matter of what kind, or on what pretext, that keep any two Christian hearts apart? Do we not blush in our shame, when we look at the church as it is, and then read these wonderful words of her great Head, "I pray that they all may be one; *as thou Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us?*"

I. Keeping this exposition in mind, let us endeavor to gain an intelligent view of what is involved in a true union of believers.

The pattern given us, as we have seen, is the oneness of love subsisting between the Father and the Son. In this case the unity is absolute and perfect, because the persons embraced in it are perfect. There is nothing partial in their sublime concord. It is not an agreement on some things, coexisting with disagreement on others, or a consent to leave certain subjects in abeyance. It is a complete, all-inclusive unity, restricted by nothing, and incapable of being impaired.

But men are imperfect. And out of imperfection differences

necessarily grow. Were all men perfect, all men would see the truth substantially alike. But as they are not, different views and different modes of expressing them are but natural consequences.

What, then, does the text mean? Are we to let it down from its high eminence? Are we to resort to any partial interpretation? Are we to modify its sublime sense? Not at all. It expresses the end to be desired and aimed after with all the heart, while it does not disregard facts, or imply that there are no difficulties to be overcome.

Put by the side of this a somewhat similar case. Men are required to be holy. The infinite holiness of God is set before them, and they are enjoined to imitate that. But it is still true that the Christian is only partially sanctified at any stage of his probation, and that he will not be completely sanctified until he passes from his probation to his reward. Are we to infer, then, that the believer is to be satisfied with imperfect holiness, and is to seek after this as an end? By no means! He is to desire and aim after perfect purity, knowing this, that no limit is assigned to progress in sanctification; that he has no right to prescribe one for himself; that he may approach indefinitely near the high standard of gospel piety; and that his proper growth depends on his persistent reaching ever after something higher.

The same reasoning applies to our present subject. The church is to strive perpetually to realize the image of union which our Saviour drew. Disagreement may result from human infirmity, but none the less does it contradict the high ideal of the Scriptures; none the less is it to be rejected and removed as far as possible from the boundaries of God's earthly kingdom as an intruder. If radical diversity and opposition be accepted as right, piety must necessarily degenerate. If what is natural, be regarded as therefore best, the stimulus to improvement is at once destroyed. The Christian is under grace, and Christian development is a development by grace, and that which enables us in our private discipline and culture to crucify the fleshly lusts, can equally give us strength to break down those hindrances which keep men from seeing eye to eye.

Yet at the same time we need to learn that some things due to the limitations of our knowledge and piety are not necessarily prohibitions of union; that men may have features that distinguish, without dividing them or setting them against one another. It would be, and we believe it is to be the crowning glory of our religion on earth, that despite differences of opinion, and various habits of thought among Christians, they will all be blended in the oneness of a blessed charity, and in mutual helpfulness in the same great work. Among imperfect beings, absolute similarity can only be brought about at once by their be-

coming in effect mere machines. Men are not machines. They are not all run in the same mould, nor obliged to the same modes of thought and action. A mechanical unity is not adapted to their nature, and can become the source of no genuine and lasting good. What a triumph it will be, however, when the whole church shall find that, notwithstanding circumstantial varieties, her members are all one, without a feeling of hostility, jealousy, suspicion or rivalry! There would be nothing so admirable in this, could there be but one possible opinion on every subject. But the grandeur of the result will be seen in the substantial and universal accord of Christian sympathy and of religious life in this imperfect world. Our Lord's prayer contemplated a victory over difficulties that would inevitably grow out of the tendencies common to our humanity, and which grace alone can guide and control.

The grounds of distinction and separation in the church are chiefly two. They are found on the one hand in the differences of doctrine, and on the other in differences of government, with which mainly we are all familiar. Neither doctrine nor government is a thing of slight importance. Paul counsels Timothy to "hold fast the form of sound words;" which certainly implies the value of a thorough maintenance, and a clear and definite enunciation of the teachings of Scripture. Our Saviour prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth;" from which it is reasonable to infer that no man can be justifiable in holding loose views of that divine teaching which is so prominent an instrument of his sanctification.

And so also the church must be governed, for Christ has formally committed discipline to it; and our own reason tells us that a wise and efficient administration of discipline is all important to the purity and vigor of the kingdom of God on earth. But in both these departments there is a limit within which Christian liberty may be lawfully, if conscientiously exercised, as beyond that limit it may not. If a body of Christians should dispense with all external organization, do away with all discipline, and leave its members to the largest personal license, without any definite responsibility, it would be destitute of an essential feature of the visible church. But having government and discipline, it may arrange these according to an honest interpretation of the Bible. And as no particular form of church government is prescribed, it would be too much to expect that all would settle down upon the same plan. Honest preferences here do not involve, by any necessity, either the negative relation of non-intercourse, or the positive one of opposition between those who differ.

Hence, under distinct organizations, various names may be given to the officers and courts whose duty it is to care for the

piety of the people. Different modes of inducting into office may be enjoined. We prefer Presbyterial ordination by associated bishops, and believe it to be, beyond all others, scriptural. But another inclines to the laying on of hands by a single bishop, holding a separate office from the body of the ministry. There is no reason why we should not defer to his own choice, and acknowledge the substantial validity of that which is most agreeable to his own convictions ; and if he in the same spirit of charity accords us the same liberty, there is an end of all controversy, without any surrender of preferences. And precisely so with the sacraments. To some the weight of testimony seems to favor immersion as the more valid mode of baptism. We need have no hesitation in conceding that validity. But by the same right of Christian judgment, we prefer the pouring of water as according better with our understanding of the Scriptures. Let them acknowledge the validity of ours, as we do of their baptism, and we differ still ; but we do not disagree, nor feel any cause of alienation or discord. It is a mere question between the two little words "a" and "the." Sectarian narrowness lays claim to *the* exclusive and necessary mode. A genuine charity is satisfied, if what it prefers is at least *a* valid compliance with Christ's command. Particular forms and modes are not essential ; for if they were, it is impossible to suppose that such vast masses of the church would have been left to fall into fatal errors upon these points ; for with so many diversities there must be error somewhere : and incredible that, if they have fatally erred, God should have so perpetuated their numbers, influence and power, and so largely blessed and accepted their work, attesting it as with his own indelible seal.

In the matter of doctrine the same reasoning applies. If any deny the fundamental truths of the gospel, that is one thing ; but if, holding to these, they differ upon difficult and obscure points, is there any necessity for, or any reason in, their separation and estrangement from one another ? Surely no one can assert this. If any should shut out from view the cross of our Redeemer, then there is between them and us an insuperable barrier. For we are taught that of this great superstructure, the church, Jesus Christ is the chief corner-stone. But the man in whom dwells the love of Christ, and who is controlled by the law of Christ, is the brother of every other man who stands in the same relation to that Saviour. They may not interpret every passage of holy writ in the same way, nor have precisely the same systems of theology, but they are both the friends of Him who died for the sins of the world, and that should make them friends of one another. The Lord Jesus is the bond of union ; a bond so strong, that if they are really and sensibly held by it, no separating influence should avail more to sunder them than would a thread of gossamer against links of steel.

It is conceivable that the time will come when even minor distinctions among the people of God shall be done away, and when Christians shall not only be one in love, but one in their organic constitution as a church. But the hope of real union is not to be abandoned, if we deem this result improbable. The differences of mental structure, and of local influences may, for aught we know, separate men into different branches of one great church to the end of time. But, if so, the separation will only be economical, and not vital. It will be something equivalent to the division of an army into cavalry, artillery, and infantry, which does not affect its unity, or require for it more than one head. If Christian hearts can all be welded together in love, there may be a wise practical end to be gained by denominational division without sectarian jealousies, affording a field for a more thorough development of the various qualities and energies of the church. On this point, we can offer only our conjectures, avoiding the presumption of dogmatic decision. But this is plain, that there is nothing necessarily hostile to union in each Christian working with all his heart in his own denomination, provided his end be the glory of Christ. There is at present no other way. The stronger each branch of the church is, in its *legitimate* spirit and work, the stronger the church is as a whole ; and Christian union is not to be promoted by disloyalty to conviction, nor by idleness or sluggishness in the field where God's Providence has allotted our toil.

And it is equally clear that the end in view does not require nor warrant any toleration of vital error. Union is great, but truth is greater ; and a union attained through the surrender of any *essential* doctrine, would be worse than separation. No calamity could befall God's people more fatal than to be swallowed up in a united church built upon great doctrinal errors, or great corruptions in practice. The history of the Church of Rome is a pointed example and a solemn warning.

The necessary conditions, then, precedent to Christian oneness, are simple and intelligible. First, there must be a common holding of the vital and distinctive truths of the Gospel. Secondly, we must have universal charity in respect to things not prescribed, and upon which men of equal honesty and piety may and do differ. And, thirdly, we must recognize denominational distinctions as only economical, and not of the essence of religion ; as things which *may* disappear in time, but which, if they do not disappear, are meant not to divide and alienate, but to develop and energize the church.

II. That there are hindrances to this desirable union, we are all painfully aware. The failure to distinguish accurately between things essential and things not essential, the cultivation

of party spirit, the pride of reason, the stubbornness of prejudice, all these stand in the way of the whole church becoming one. But these, and all similar obstacles, may be resolved into the imperfection of human nature, and a want of that large measure of grace which it is the privilege of the Christian to enjoy. We must not forget that the church is composed of imperfectly sanctified men. We are not to expect that all error will be immediately rooted out from the midst of it, or that its members will at once cease to exhibit the marks and effects of human infirmity. Hence we are not to despair of union because it may not come swiftly. We are not to wonder that, under the pretence of schemes for union, the barriers of division are sometimes strengthened, the hands that should pull down being busy in adding new layers to the walls that are already too high and massive. Our Lord's own prayer seems to imply that there would be influences tending to separate his friends ; and we are to rise above all discouragements and difficulties by our simple faith that what Jesus asked of his Father *will* be accomplished, to the glory of the Divine name, the joy of the church, and the confusion of all its enemies.

III. And, lastly, let us not forget, that if there are hindrances, so also there are helps. The progress of sacred scholarship will secure an influence on the right side, by the impartial investigation and unfolding of the truth. The advancement of science and the liberal arts, the increase of the means of communication between nations and localities—all tending to beget a more honest appreciation of each other among men, and a spirit of general toleration and mutual attraction, these will react upon Christianity, as they are themselves promoted by it. Revivals of religion will exercise an immense power in the same direction. And the Holy Spirit of peace and love is the Divine agent in whose grace and might we trust, to bring about the glorious consummation for which our Saviour prayed. What, therefore, can we as individuals do, better than to give ourselves vigorously to Christ's service, to cultivate the spirit of gospel love, and to pray unceasingly, and with an honest expectation and faith, that the church may become one? This will be better than to meet and discuss the question, as one of theory. The moment we attempt to do this, each has his project, or feels entitled to prescribe his own conditions of union ; and the cause is sometimes hindered under the guise of promoting it. Let us rather come closer to Christ, and so closer to each other. Let us hold our several peculiarities, if they are worthy of being held, loyally indeed, but with eminent modesty and kindness. Let us hold out the hand of fellowship to all who are the friends of Jesus, and bear ourselves towards them, not jealously, but

with frank and open cordiality. Let us redouble our exertions in those Christian enterprises which bring members of different denominations together. Let us strive after a higher personal holiness, and a wider and more thorough diffusion of the saving word of God. Let us engage in efforts that, with God's grace, shall ripen into a revival, not circumscribed by the walls of a single sanctuary, or confined to one locality,—a revival which, succeeding the great preparatory strife that has been waged in blood upon our soil, shall spread through the land, and reach to furthest limits of Christendom.

I need hardly, in conclusion, point out what has already suggested itself, I am sure,—the advantageous position which we, as Presbyterians, occupy upon this question of Christian union. With a system of government preëminently liberal, and a spirit wholly unexclusive, we have no presumptuous claims from which to recede, and no shibboleth which men must pronounce before we call them brethren. Adhering to our own revered symbols of doctrine with a sincere conviction, and upholding our polity with a loyal love to those principles which have stood the test of fiery ordeals, we yet glory in this above all, that we hold Christ as the Head, and rejoice in all that honors him.

Let us magnify that great Name which is the only true and enduring bond of union in God's earthly kingdom, the common Saviour and Leader of the Christian host. Let us labor, not for a mere external union, in the attempt to realize this theory or that, but rather for the MASTER, in that spirit of love, which, as it deepens and spreads, will join heart to heart, and church to church, and people to people, in a constant progression towards the end for which Christ prayed. Let us have, with all God's children, that Christ-like aim, in pursuing which we shall of necessity mingle in the same paths with all who love Jesus, and stand shoulder to shoulder under the same banner. Every genuine triumph of the gospel is a step towards the breaking down of the barriers of pride and prejudice that divide the church. And it is our duty, and not less our privilege, to pray, fervently and incessantly, with a real longing for the answer to come, that the church may be one in the Father and the Son, so that Christ may be glorified in his people as never yet he has been in the history of his kingdom, and that all men may believe in Him whom God has sent.

SERMON XXIX.

AUTHOR'S NAME NOT GIVEN.

THE INFLUENCE OF COMPANY.

"He that walketh with wise men shall be wise : but a companion of fools shall be destroyed."—Prov. xiii. 20.

THE words *wise* and *fool* are used, in the book of Proverbs, as synonymous with *good* and *bad*, *righteous* and *wicked*; or in the language of the New Testament, with *believer* and *unbeliever*. The propriety of such terms when not applied to reproach the one nor flatter the other, but merely as descriptive of facts, is clearly evident. Whether we consider the happiness religion affords to its possessors in this life, or the reward it brings to them in another, it is equally true that the wicked are foolish, and the righteous are wise.

Every man's moral character, then, will be much the same as that of his intimate associates. This is a maxim which is contained in our text. To illustrate and apply it, therefore, will be the object of the following discourse.

First, then, it is abundantly implied in the Scriptures. The Psalmist, after giving an account of the holy exercises of his heart, and the daily devotions in which he was engaged, declares that he is a companion of all them that fear God, and of them that keep his precepts. (Ps. cxix. 63.) Such company he chose because their conversation and habits were like his own, their affections were placed on the same objects, and their kind admonitions and counsels were incentives to a godly life. To say that he was a companion of all them that fear God, it would appear, was the same thing in his view, as to say that he feared God himself. "Whoso keepeth the law," says Solomon, "is a wise son : but a companion of riotous men shameth his father." Here the inspired writer takes it for granted, that "a companion of riotous men" will himself be of the same character ; for he uses the term as opposite to the keeping of the law. In our text also, he asserts, "He that walketh with wise men," that is, he that is their companion, "shall be wise : but a companion of fools shall be destroyed." Now it is obvious that no man will be punished for the faults of his neighbor. It is only because the companion of fools is himself a fool, and must therefore partake of the destiny to which that character is appointed, that Solomon says he shall be destroyed.

Not only is it the voice of Scripture that every man's moral character is much the same as that of his intimate associates, but all the principles of human nature with which we are acquainted, speak to the same point.

Man is very much a creature of imitation. However he may disclaim it in moments of pride and independence, it is still true that he imitates continually those whom he loves, or for whose company he has an attachment. The man of roughness becomes polished by continual intercourse with polished society. The man of refinement becomes coarse and indelicate by a familiarity with persons of that description. Let a man of piety permit himself freely to associate with a person of thoughtlessness and gaiety, and one or the other will change his character; will catch the spirit of his companion. Either the latter will become thoughtful and tender on the subject of religion, or the former will find the ardor of his piety abate, and the temper of the world get the ascendancy.

This principle of imitation which thus assimilates people who associate together, begins with our infancy, and is never entirely eradicated in after life. The child, so soon as he notices the objects about him, looks to the people with whom he is most familiar for examples. He learns to talk by imitation; he learns to read by imitation; and when he arrives at mature years, he learns the practices of the world by imitation. If his parents, or those with whom he is early conversant are respecters of religion, so is the child a respecter of religion; if they scoff at holy things, so does he; and if they are votaries of pleasure, so is he. The companions whom he first chooses give another stamp to the character of his feelings and habits. He will not do what displeases his associates, because they would banish him from their society. He becomes, therefore, one with them in affections and pursuits.

On the supposition that this principle of imitation exists, proceed all the customs of life. To acquire the manners of polished society, your children are placed among polished people, that they may observe their actions and imitate them. To become merchants, they are placed in counting-houses, not only to learn their business, but that, by continual intercourse with mercantile men, they may catch their spirit and acquire their habits.

That this principle of imitation exists, is, moreover, evident from the similarity of manners and feelings which prevails in particular districts of country, and even in different circles of the same district. Now, this similarity cannot always, nor indeed generally, proceed from the local situation of the people, but from their intercourse with each other by which they become identified in their tastes, their prejudices, and their pursuits.

There is a principle of sympathy also, which operates to produce a similarity of character among those who associate together. We naturally mingle in the joys and sorrows of our companions, and feel as they do respecting the causes from which

they flow. Thus we do not, until our feelings are touched by the same things, the same motives excite us to action, and the same character is ours. A man, for instance, has entered on an important enterprise concerning the issues of which he is very anxious. That man is your particular friend, who is perpetually expressing in your presence his hopes and fears. Now you cannot but enter deeply into his feelings ; and when the joyful news of his success arrives, you rejoice with him. So also in things of a moral nature. If your intimate friend is in the habit of rejoicing at the spread of irreligion, or the downfall of piety in particular cases, you will insensibly catch his spirit, and feel as he does. The principle of sympathy, like all others, which God has implanted in us for our comfort and preservation, may be perverted to the worst of purposes.

That every man's moral character is much the same as that of his intimate associates, appears, moreover, from the testimony of *facts*.

Show me the man who is profane in his conversation, or a despiser of religion, and I will show you a companion of swearers or of infidels. It is invariably the case. You never saw a modest amiable man who did not choose men like himself for his companions. Nor did you ever behold a hater of religion who did not associate with similar men.

From profane history, too, innumerable examples might be selected. Who were the associates of Voltaire? Infidels like himself. In whom did Robespierre meet with suitable companions? In men whose consciences, like his, were "seared with a hot iron," and whose characters, therefore, were blackened with the foulest crimes. Yonder gamester,—did he go to the gaming table alone, or in the company of the virtuous? That Sabbath-breaker,—in whose company is he when he walks the fields, or rides for pleasure, instead of appearing, as his duty demands, in the house of God? The man who spends his time in idleness, instead of attending to his proper business,—does he not delight in the company of men like himself? Who are the men with whom yonder despiser of religion continually associates? Not the blameless disciples of the Son of God, whose conduct would be a perpetual reproof to his wicked practices; but men like himself who are ready to go all lengths in iniquity to gratify a sinful heart. Who are the men that yonder humble worshiper of God chooses for his companions? Not the scoffer, the Sabbath-breaker, the profane; but those who pursue the same things that he does, and whose souls are of a kindred mould with his.

That every man's moral character is much the same as that of his associates, appears then from Scripture, from the principles of human nature, and from facts. In deducing practical instruction from this important truth, I would observe,

1. That we are here furnished with a criterion by which to distinguish characters.

There is no better rule to find out what a man is, in a moral point of view, than to inquire who the men are with whom he continually of choice associates. It has therefore passed into a common proverb, "That a man is known by the company he keeps." Does any reader of this, then, take to his intimate friendship disturbers of the peace of society by their midnight carousals? That man is to be suspected of similar practices himself. Does any one habitually consort with the profane, the lascivious, the idle? He is to be set down as no better than they. Does any one, of choice, daily associate with the man whose darling subject is the disparagement of religious people as the cause which they profess to love? Write him down as an advocate of impiety. Does any one choose for his companions, "fools," who "make a mock at sin," and who trifle at every religious consideration? He is one of their number. On the other hand, is any one generally found in the company of the pious? Either he is pious himself, or he is "not far from the kingdom of God."

2. We see by our subject the good influence of virtuous company.

It is not only the language of our text, but, as we have seen, of experience. "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise." The company of religious people tends to create and preserve those reverential impressions of eternal things which are absolutely necessary to our becoming Christians, or continuing such. He that from childhood, has been accustomed to look on religion and its concerns as matters of serious moment, is ordinarily more susceptible of salutary impressions of divine truth than others. Nay, the company of the pious often brings those, who have been taught to disregard religion, to the knowledge of the truth, and to the hopes of salvation. So far as religion influences its possessor, it makes him benevolent. He will therefore do all the good which lies in his power to his companions. The religion of the gospel is of a diffusive nature. It is not contented to reside in one breast; but sheds abroad its blessed influence. It spreads around it a healthful atmosphere which nourishes all that come within its reach, and diffuses life, and vigor, and joy, to them in abundance. It is the tree of life from whose wholesome branches proceed leaves for the healing of the nations. Can such a principle then exist in Christians, and not prove beneficial to their intimate associates?

In the company of the pious, too, will be found those real friends who will not forsake us in the hour of adversity. Their principle is that "it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting;" and they generally act accord-

ingly. How often does the kind hand of Christian friendship wipe away the tears of woe, and rob the destroyer of half his sting ! How often is the healing balm administered to the wounded spirit, and the smile of heaven made to animate the countenance ! Ye that have drunk the cup of sorrow, know the value of the friendship which is regulated by religion. Ye that choose your companions among the servants of God, feel the worth of their society. You know that in adversity as well as in prosperity they are constant. Their councils direct you in the wayward path of life, and their prayers ascend to the throne of divine grace in your behalf, and bring down the selectest of heaven's blessings upon you. And when the bed of death shall be spread for you, and no earthly hand can help, their tender souls will be poured out before their heavenly Father, that he may receive you into the mansions of glory. Such is the benign influence of virtuous companions. But

3. We learn from our subject another lesson—the influence and danger of evil company, especially to the young.

As we are naturally prone to catch the spirit of our associates, we are much more so when that spirit acts in conjunction with the wicked propensities of our own hearts. It is quaintly observed by the excellent Richard Baxter, "that stones want no additional weight to keep them to the earth." As we are prone to evil, all the influence which company can afford, should be against it. Man is a social being ; and, as such, must have society. As the company of the good sheds an influence whose tendency is to make us good also ; so that of the bad awakens all the dormant energies of wickedness which the heart possesses, and calls them into action. Unlike the pious, too, their friendship is not genuine. While the sky is clear, they are with us ; but when the clouds thicken, they stand aloof ; and when the storm breaks out, they retire, and leave us alone to suffer its desolation. What is such friendship worth ? It has no substance. It is the mere shadow that moves along the wall. We attempt to grasp it, and it eludes us ; the sun retires, and it is gone.

Even in its best circumstances, the intimate companionship of wicked men is a real calamity. It speaks but to blast, spreads devastation among all within its reach, and kindles up the fire of divine wrath which will burn forever. That unhappy youth began his career in the paths of decency and sobriety, and seemed to all a fair candidate for the kingdom of heaven. He was lovely in his behavior, generous and noble in his heart, and his company was sought by the wise and good. The smile of contentment sat upon his countenance, and the joy of spring beamed in his eye. In an evil hour he met with one of his own age whose manners were not destitute of many attractions, but

whose heart was deeply rooted in the ways of sin. For the time, his conversation was lively and interesting, and mingled with no black spots to warn the devoted victim of his danger. The acquaintance is now formed, and another interview is soon had. The youth goes with his new companion to his accustomed places of resort, and finds them to be haunts of dissipation. His conscience remonstrates, but he deems it too late, for this time, to withdraw. He returns to his retirement, and perhaps thinks on his evil way and mourns, and resolves to visit it no more. Not many days after, he receives another solicitation, but he remembers his former remorse, and refuses to comply. Importunity, however, prevails upon him, and he goes with a failing heart. By the repetition of such scenes, he becomes at length divested of his salutary fears, and concludes that he is only indulging in the innocent pleasure which is proper for youth.

The first profane oath which he heard startled his tender conscience, and he felt that the wrath of God awaits all who thus trifle with their Maker. That oath is repeated until it passes by unnoticed. The breath of profaneness has lost its horror to his senses. At length he begins to question with himself whether such things be not a mark of superior courage and manliness of feeling. At first he rejected the idea with amazement; but by the suggestions of the great adversary and of his own heart, he again resumes it. He became more and more familiar with scenes of guilt, till at length he ventured to drop a profane oath himself; and as he perceived no immediate evil resulting from it, he ventured to repeat that sin with less emotion than before. His companions, by their example, if not by their advice, encouraged him to proceed in his career of wickedness, till he indulged in profaneness without remorse.

When he first heard religion and its concerns treated with levity, he noticed the awful profanation with abhorrence; and perhaps formed some faint resolutions to forsake the company where such things are heard. But the example of his associates and the tendency of his own heart to catch their spirit, hardened his conscience, and now that monitor within, which was once faithful, leaves him in the quiet possession of his iniquities. She has now only fallen asleep, however, to awake beyond the grave, in the most dreadful agonies of despair.

This youth, then, who once appeared so pleasant to the eyes of piety, so fair a candidate for heaven, is now sunk in the depths of vice, and but little hope can remain of his being ever reclaimed to the paths of peace. Ah! how unlike to that first happy state!

O ye, who have thus been seduced from the society of the good, look from the borders of that pit into which you are just plunging, back to the gates of life. Say, are you willing to forego the pleasures of eternal glory for those sordid enjoyments

which only end in disappointment, and are followed, in your moments of reflection, by many a pang? Say, are you willing to take up your abode in the dungeon of despair, when you might walk beneath the light which beams from the throne of God? Say, is not the company with whom you associate, such as, if there is a hell, will lead you thither, and overwhelm you in that sea of trouble from which there is no deliverance? By the influence of your companions, when the voice of conscience disturbs you, it is soon fled. You resort to your pleasures, and drown the clamours within your breasts in noisy mirth. You fall asleep in your sin, and dream of happiness here, but put off the considerations of hereafter. It is an easy matter, with such consciences as you possess, to imagine that the wrath of God, because it is delayed, will never arrive. While surrounded by your companions, you can paint before your imaginations the delights of sin, and bury in a momentary oblivion the anguish which it must eventually afford. You can laugh at the salutary fears of piety, and commit those deeds of darkness to which your wicked hearts may prompt. And all this may serve as an opiate to lull you to repose. But

—Say, dreamers of gay dreams,
How will you weather an eternal night
Where such expedients fail?

Of such, however, as we have now addressed, there is little hope. Divine grace has power to reclaim them, but it need not be expected, except in here and there a solitary instance, for the sake of pious friends. Many undoubtedly are given over to work iniquity with greediness, and to reap its dreadful reward. It is to you who are yet free from the contamination of evil companions, that our hopes extend. Flee, then, the company of the wicked. "Their very touch is pollution, and their embrace is death." "Evil communications," says an inspired writer, "corrupt good manners." Seek ye then the company of such as fear the God of Heaven. If you have any regard to the interests of this world—if you have any regard to a "good name," which the Bible has pronounced to be "better than precious ointment;" and above all—if you have any regard to the interests of the world to come, to the joys or sorrows of immortality,—flee the company of those who would introduce you into sin. Be not deceived with outward appearances. How fair and promising soever the show of friendship which a vicious man can make, may be; he is only a friend clothed in the habiliments of an angel. He is only the serpent which promised with fair words, and drew his victim headlong into ruin. When an opportunity occurs, he will draw you away from all that is lovely in life, from all that can create peace in death, and happiness beyond the grave.